

**Advice Note to the First Minister
From the Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Intensive Family Support
June 2026**



1. Context

This Advice Note should be read alongside previous advice and briefings from the Independent Strategic Advisor to Scottish Ministers and officials, which set out the broader context for recommending Intensive Family Support as a priority in the forthcoming Programme for Government.

2. Purpose

The focus of this Advice Note is to set out what underpins the advice to make Intensive Family Support available to all children and families who need it, whenever they need it, for as long as they need it, wherever they live in Scotland.

Intensive Family Support will not remove the need for some babies, children and young people to experience aspects of the 'care system' that are not in family settings, nor will it meet all of the needs of care experienced adults. However, as a priority that can accelerate progress towards keeping the promise by 2030, while demonstrating Public Service Reform in practice, Intensive Family Support represents one of the clearest opportunities available.

Scotland already knows a great deal about what effective support for children and families looks like. Whole Family Support approaches and Plan 24-30 provide a shared planning and monitoring framework for national implementation and improvement.

What is required now is reach and consistency of experience and outcome. Therefore, this Advice Note covers:

- 💖 WHAT is meant by Intensive Family Support? A working definition.
- 💖 Making the case – WHY include Intensive Family Support as a national priority in Programme for Government.
- 💖 HOW to implement Intensive Family Support by translating the principles into practice.
- 💖 WHAT this means for Scottish Government (WHO).
- 💖 In summary.
- 💖 WHAT next?

This proposition is intended to support further discussion with Cabinet Secretaries, Ministers, officials and delivery partners on how Intensive Family Support can advance multiple interconnected policy priorities while providing a practical model for Public Service Reform.

3. What is meant by Intensive Family Support? A working definition.

Intensive Family Support is a targeted, intensive wraparound approach designed to help families experiencing complex, interconnected challenges. Delivered through coordinated multi-agency support, it works alongside families in their homes and communities, with the flexibility and persistence required to respond to need, reduce risk and prevent escalation.



Delivered effectively, it recognises the impact of the multiple and interconnected challenges families may experience simultaneously. Working alongside families to build trusting relationships, the workforce enables them to access the practical and emotional support they identify as most important.

While closely aligned to broader Whole Family Support and early help approaches, Intensive Family Support can be understood as an enhanced, tenacious, more intensive Whole Family Support approach. It is distinguished by the depth, flexibility and persistence of support required to prevent crisis and escalation.

It aims to build resilience, prevent family breakdown, and avoid the need for crisis intervention by providing practical and emotional care and can provide the foundations from which families can go on to thrive.

Crucially, it provides vital opportunities to identify babies, children, and young people in danger at the earliest stage, helping to prevent abuse, neglect, and significant harm, before lasting damage occurs.

Some local authorities and third sector organisations already aim to provide Intensive Family Support, offering examples that can be built upon. However, it is not consistently available across Scotland, and access too often remains dependent on where families live. This can be changed.

4. Making the case – why include Intensive Family Support in Programme for Government

Effective Intensive Family Support requires services to organise around the lives of children and families, rather than the other way around. It challenges structures and systems, organisational boundaries, funding streams and statutory responsibilities. It demands policy cohesion, more flexible, longer-term investment to enable greater integration via stronger local partnerships with a sustained focus on shared outcomes. Intensive Family Support is improved service provision and wider Public Service Reform. It can support excellent public services, designed around the needs of families and children, supported by a valued and empowered workforce.

The human case

At its heart, Intensive Family Support is about working alongside families to avoid crisis, to build their capacity and empower them to improve their lives. By helping families access the right support at the right time, it can enable more babies and children to grow up safely within their families and communities wherever that is possible – reducing the demand for current ‘placements’ and alleviating future capacity issues. It would also reduce poverty-related and inequality-driven involvement with the ‘care system’ and help break intergenerational cycles of adversity by improving outcomes for



children and, in turn, the next generation of parents. It would strengthen family and community capacity rather than be a statutory substitute for it.

The most up-to-date government statistics (24/25) show that just under 90% of children in Scotland's 'care system' lived in family and community settings - including 'looked after at home', prospective adoption, kinship and foster families. Intensive Family Support can strengthen supports around these families - and others including adopted children. Through providing Intensive Family Support, outcomes for children in these care settings should improve.

Vitality, Intensive Family Support can also keep the most vulnerable babies and children safe by helping identify earlier those for whom staying at home is not possible and statutory intervention is required.

The prevention and fiscal case

Intensive Family Support provides a practical route to shifting public services towards prevention. While many of the families requiring intensive support will have acute and complex needs, Intensive Family Support has a preventative effect. It has the potential to reduce current and future failure demand for more costly actions later. It creates opportunities to align public spending more closely with meeting the needs of children and families, rather than supporting the structures of existing services. In doing so, it supports a more intentional shift of resources towards prevention and early intervention. This offers government the opportunity to invest in what works, rather than continuing to absorb the growing costs of what has gone wrong.

The system reform case

Intensive Family Support is not simply a children's services issue and does not rely on social workers to get alongside families. Families experience multiple systems simultaneously – their lives are shaped by policies and practice and services across health, education, housing, justice, addiction and substance use, social security, employability, youth work, communities amongst others, including the 'care system'.

As a result, Intensive Family Support is inherently cross-portfolio and cross-sector, and cannot be delivered by a single service, funded via a single budget, or owned by a single Minister. Its success depends on collective leadership, joined-up working, and effective multi-agency practice across government and beyond.

It requires services to organise around the needs of children and families, rather than around organisational boundaries, professional silos or funding streams. This shift will change the role of the state from managing the consequences of adversity to preventing it. It will support greater collaboration and integration across sectors and services, and it will create the conditions for national and local reform.



The enabling conditions

Intensive Family Support can help build the foundations required for wider and longer-term reform, creating the conditions for a more person-centred, enabling approach to public services. Delivering support in ways that are relational, preventative and holistic requires considered planning and investment in workforce capacity, capability and confidence, and attention paid to systemic issues such as data, risk, policy, and scrutiny. It depends upon effective collaborative leadership, strong relationships, trust and active listening. By creating more and better opportunities for organisations committed to keeping the promise to work collectively around the needs of children and families, Intensive Family Support facilitates a shift away from organisational boundaries towards shared responsibility for outcomes.

Scotland's work to keep the promise has helped create the conditions for an Intensive Family Support approach to develop. Not simply as another reform priority among many, instead as a practical and measurable route for Scotland to succeed in reforming public services around people's lives, translating its commitment to keeping the promise into demonstrable action and creating the conditions for sustainable Public Service Reform.

By taking this step, Scotland has the opportunity not only to deliver on its own ambitions but to set an international example of how public services can be reformed around the lives of children and families.

Future proofing

The Care Inspectorate's Learning Reviews (formerly Significant Case Reviews) aim to understand the circumstances around serious harm or death of a baby, child, young person, or adult. Joint Inspections examine how well local systems are functioning. Audit Scotland's performance audits assess if public bodies are using public money effectively and efficiently to achieve intended outcomes.

Analysis of the conclusions reached by all three agencies through years of scrutiny identifies the same, repeated challenges: fragmentation, weak accountability, inconsistent use of evidence, insufficient prevention, workforce pressures, short-term decision making and difficulty translating policy ambition into improved outcomes.

By working through the issues outlined in this Advice Note - and others - to include Intensive Family Support in Programme for Government, the Scottish Government has an opportunity to address all of these systemic barriers and establish a more sustainable and resilient model for reform.

5. HOW to implement Intensive Family Support by translating the principles into practice

Recognising that Intensive Family Support cannot be delivered through a single programme, provider or model, the promise (report) sets out 10 principles that provide a

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clear framework for the support children and families should experience. These must not only inform service delivery, but also how services are designed, funded, commissioned, governed and evaluated:

the promise principle	issues for consideration in practice
Community based	Support within communities and homes wherever possible, rather than requiring families to navigate multiple services and buildings. This will include family support staff and social workers working alongside families in their own homes – meeting them where they are. Resources should be directed towards places where families live their lives and are most likely to find helpful. Services will be designed to suit local contexts, including remote and rural areas. The money can follow the child and the family.
Responsive and timely	Families need to be able to access support before difficulties escalate into crisis. Thresholds, referral pathways and eligibility criteria must not prevent early support being provided when it is needed. Families do not live their lives 9 to 5, five days a week so office hours and services limited to day times can be a barrier to families accessing support. Having services – and support workers – available 24/7 requires a workforce with appropriate support and terms and conditions.
Working with family assets	Support needs to identify and build on strengths, relationships and community connections, as well as mitigating risks and challenges. Change designed and delivered alongside families, rather than done to them, are more likely to be effective. This requires staff having the time to get to know the families they are working alongside and supported to develop relationships, with continuity being a factor.
Empowerment and agency	Families need to have genuine influence over decisions affecting them. The vast majority of the time, the system does not know best. Support should increase agency, confidence and capacity rather than create dependency.
Flexible	Funding, commissioning and service design needs to be able to adapt to changing family circumstances and be based on what matters to them, rather than requiring families to fit existing service structures. This requires a redesign of how policy, practice, funding and accountability works.
Holistic and relational	Support must be organised around meeting the needs of children and families, rather than professional or organisational boundaries. Relationships need to be prioritised over processes.



	Again, family support workers need time to build relationships – trust is hard won and can be undermined by short term funding, fixed term posts and staff turnover.
Therapeutic	Support must recognise the impact of (sometimes intergenerational) trauma, adversity and poverty, and be delivered in ways that promote healing, stability and recovery.
Non-stigmatising	Accessing support without fear of judgement, escalation or negative consequences is critical. All families struggle sometimes, so support should feel normal, accessible and respectful. Language is important, as is ensuring that those working alongside families bring themselves to the work first, rather than the organisation(s) they represent.
Patient and persistent	Support needs to remain available for as long as needed and be delivered with the persistence and tenacity required to respond to changing circumstances and prevent escalation. Repeated assessments and repeated referrals result in repeated disruption of trusted relationships. Time limited support is almost always designed around the needs of the system, rather than what's right for children and families, and can be damaging.
Underpinned by children's rights	Decisions need to be guided by the rights, views, wellbeing and best interests of babies and children, ensuring support strengthens children's ability to thrive within their families and communities, wherever safe to do so. While the promise is clear that families should be supported to stay together wherever it is safe to do so, it is also clear that the rights and best interests of the child are paramount.

Taken together, the ten principles above point towards a fundamentally different model of public services in local communities. The success of Intensive Family Support would be assessed through a simple question: are children and families receiving the right support, at the right time, in ways that prevent avoidable crisis? With the answer not solely found in policy activity, programme delivery or structural change, but in the experiences of children and families themselves.

6. What this means for Scottish Government

Building on the findings of the Independent Care Review and drawing on the learning since 2020, there is broad agreement about the importance of prevention and early intervention, what good looks like, and what is getting in the way. The barriers to implementation are now largely systemic:



Barrier	solution
Fragmented policy initiatives result in a lack of clarity about priorities which leads to poor delivery	Urgently bring together all policies and initiatives that refer to Intensive Family Support to create cohesion and share initiatives.
Blanket universal policies and initiatives lead to ineffective implementation	Use national and local data and evidence to identify the families and communities with the greatest level of need
Investment is concentrated in crisis response.	Create long-term investment strategies that support prevention alongside existing provision.
Short-term funding cycles undermine stability.	Move towards multi-year funding arrangements that support workforce and service sustainability.
Understanding and monitoring remains organised around systems rather than families.	Align governance, accountability and performance frameworks around outcomes for children and families, simplifying and streamlining data collection.
Workforce pressures limit capacity.	Invest in workforce development, recruitment, retention and leadership.
Professional and organisational boundaries prevent joined-up support.	Support greater integration across services and sectors.
National and local leaders are forced to prioritise demand over reform.	Create stronger mechanisms for sustaining focus on long-term outcomes and reform priorities.
Significant variation exists across Scotland driven in part by differing understandings of family support.	Establish clear national expectations and definitions while supporting local flexibility in delivery and provide support for local areas to redesign services over time.
Competing and complex demands from multiple reform programmes and the transition challenge of maintaining existing provision.	Align national programmes and priorities to create a transition strategy that clearly sequences reform activity and protects essential existing provision during transition.

Addressing these barriers is entirely possible with coordinated action across Scottish Government, local government, health, the third sector and wider partners.

7. In summary

For Intensive Family Support to become consistently available, Scottish Government's strategic role would be aligning reform activity, creating the conditions for delivery, and supporting the transition from crisis response towards prevention. This requires both immediate action and sustained system reform, with one simple question at the centre: can children and families access the support they need, when they need it, in ways that are relational, coordinated and effective?



The actions below are intended to make that a reality. They are organised around three interconnected priorities: establishing Intensive Family Support as a national reform priority; creating the conditions required for sustainable implementation; and accelerating delivery of Intensive Family Support in communities across Scotland.

i. Establish Intensive Family Support as a national reform priority

- ♥ Cabinet agree Intensive Family Support as a cross-government reform priority and use the Programme for Government to signal that commitment. Include a shared expectation that children and families can access support consistent with the promise's family support principles wherever it is needed.
- ♥ Scottish Government work in partnership to establish a shared national understanding of who Intensive Family Support is intended to reach, the outcomes it is intended to achieve, and set expectations for local implementation and how progress will be understood, measured and evidenced. The objective would be consistency of provision and outcome, rather than a standardised delivery model.
- ♥ Reflect this priority across all relevant reform programmes – including child poverty, the promise, Public Service Reform, the National Performance Framework, etc. - with clear alignment around shared outcomes for children and families, shared accountability and a strong line of sight between national ambition and local delivery.

ii. Create the conditions required for sustainable implementation of Intensive Family Support

- ♥ Sustainable implementation will require changes across funding, workforce, accountability and delivery systems. Ministers' plans need to align and simplify all funding related to family support, prevention and child poverty (at a minimum) with the objective of reducing fragmentation, simplifying reporting requirements, increasing long-term funding and enabling resources to follow children and families, rather than programmes. By incentivising identifying opportunities to align national policies, data and funding around shared outcomes for children and families, government will make it easier for local partners to invest in prevention while continuing to meet existing need.
- ♥ Quickly establish what is required to build capacity in the workforce, across sectors, to roll out Intensive Family Support. Key sectors, including social work, will continue to play a central role, so workforce capacity and pressures need to be understood and addressed. Consideration needs to be given to issues such as terms and conditions to support 24/7 availability, ensuring a consistent understanding of what family support workers are expected to do.
- ♥ The national barriers arising from commissioning and procurement arrangements, complexity of reporting against performance frameworks, information-sharing arrangements and meeting policy requirements, all of which prevent services from organising around children and families, must be identified, understood and addressed. For families to experience services as a single system, public services need to increasingly be designed and delivered differently to reflect that reality.



- ♥ By coordinating the above through a clear and shared cross-government transition plan, Ministers can set out how Scotland will increase investment in early and Intensive Family Support whilst continuing to meet existing levels of demand. This needs to address workforce capacity and capability, leadership, multi-agency and multidisciplinary practice, implementation support, learning and spread, and the pace at which resources can realistically shift upstream. Without an explicit transition plan, expectations will not be set and resources will remain locked in crisis response - even where there is broad agreement that earlier support would achieve better outcomes.
- ♥ Progress cannot be measured only through activity, expenditure or programme delivery, but can only be measured through whether children and families experience support earlier, more consistently and more effectively. When children and families can access support when they need it, in ways that are relational, coordinated and effective, Scotland can be confident that Public Service Reform is reaching the people it is intended to serve. The joint work between Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland to do this via the experiential level of the Promise Story of Progress provides a strong foundation on which to build.

iii. Accelerate the delivery of intensive, multi-agency, wraparound family support in communities across Scotland

- ♥ Scottish Government needs to develop a shared understanding of where unmet need is greatest and use that evidence to inform investment, workforce planning and capacity, and support for implementation. In the context of constrained resources, the place to start would be giving priority to the children and families facing the greatest adversity so they can access Intensive Family Support when they need it.
- ♥ Scottish Government should identify, support and invest in the expansion of existing Intensive Family Support provision where delivery infrastructure already exists, including within local authorities, communities and third sector organisations that already demonstrate effective practice. This necessitates working with all delivery partners to identify what can be expanded at pace over the next 12 months.
- ♥ There is a need for Scottish Government to clarify the roles, responsibilities and implementation accountability of existing national and local structures, including the National Social Work Agency, Children's Services Planning Partnerships, Community Planning Partnerships, the Scottish Social Work Partnership and Public Service Reform governance arrangements. These structures need to align around shared objectives, with roll out of access to Intensive Family Support and improving outcomes for children and families offering a focus.

Taken together, these actions would establish Intensive Family Support as a national reform priority; meet existing need now; align policy, funding and accountability around children and families; create the conditions for sustained local delivery at scale; support the transition from crisis response to prevention; and provide a tangible demonstration of whether Scotland is succeeding in keeping the promise and progressing its Public Service Reform ambitions. In



doing so, Scotland can demonstrate internationally what is possible when a nation aligns policy, investment and practice around the needs of children and families.

8. What next?

Further work is needed to ensure Intensive Family Support is not treated as a stand-alone initiative but instead as a route through which existing ambitions can be brought together and delivered coherently. This will make sure the proposition is fully aligned to the 'Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland' and reflects the complex and interconnected challenges families face which span the 'care system', poverty, housing, addiction, violence and justice.

By making Intensive Family Support a Programme for Government priority, the Scottish Government will reinforce its commitment to families by providing the support required, as identified by those who need it most.

The Independent Strategic Advisor and The Promise Scotland stand ready to work with Cabinet Secretaries, Ministers, officials, local government and delivery partners to further develop this proposition, understand its implications across portfolios and delivery systems, and support the collective action needed to make Intensive Family Support a reality for children and families across Scotland.